

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 DOHA 001240

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/RA, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PINS PREL SOCI OA

SUBJECT: HOW ELITE QATARI WOMEN VIEW THEMSELVES

1. (U) Summary. The Political Section has been following up with Qatari women throughout the last few months to gain their perspective on various facets of Qatari society and the changing role of women. At a recent gathering of elite Qatari women, Poloff asked the women to express their views on a range of issues in Qatari society and how it affected their role and status as women. Guests included: Fareeda Al-Obaidli, director of Qatar Foundation for the Protection of Women & Children; Sheikha Al-Jufairi, member of Central Municipal Council; Maryam Arab, legal expert at the Ministry of Justice, Noor Al-Malki, acting director of the Women's Department at the Supreme Council for Family Affairs; Nahid Al-Emadi, head of international contracts at the Ministry of Justice; Najat Khalaf, legal expert at Ministry of Justice; Abeer Rashid Al-Kawari, human resources supervisor at Qatar Petroleum; and Tarfa Al-Sada, vice president of the Committee on the Elderly at the Supreme Council for Family Affairs. The discussion covered such issues as work and equal opportunity, education, democracy and elections, children, and legal rights. While they highlight areas of discrimination and inequality, Qatari women firmly believe their situation has improved and expect further progress for the next generation of Qatari women. The women attributed these positive developments to the Amir and Sheikha Mozah, asserting that since the present Amir came to power, Qatari women have gained and continue to gain more rights than ever before. End Summary.

Women, the Workplace and Equal Opportunity

2. (U) Prior to 1996, Qatari women were limited to working in more traditional fields like health and education. However, since the current Amir assumed power in 1995, women have advanced professionally and are represented now in diverse fields. Qatari women hold positions in the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Civil Service Affairs and Housing, and in law enforcement, the oil and gas sector, private business and banking. The president of Qatar University, the minister of education, and the chairpersons of the National Human Rights Committee and Supreme Council for Health Affairs are all women. Women also hold prominent positions in the Supreme Council for Family Affairs, the Election Committee, and the Supreme Council for Communication and Information Technology. While the women hailed the professional advancement of women, they acknowledged however, that the majority of Qatari women continue to occupy lower posts, typically administrative and clerical positions.

3. (U) Some of the women noted that while Qatari men respect the right of women to work and do not oppose women at the workplace, men still tend to be wary of women in high positions and are not always supportive of them. Men also are reluctant to be supervised by women. The women also admitted that they are not treated fairly in aspects of salary and employee benefits. Our contacts stated that men earn more than women even if they perform the same work. They observed that although the new labor law provides for equal pay for equal work, the reality is different; there is a lack of enforcement of this provision. Men also receive higher housing and social (i.e., marital status) allowances as part of their work benefits than women. According to the women we spoke to, the lack of equity in pay and allowances reinforces women's dependency on men. This deficiency tends to limit, and in some cases prevent, women from taking certain decisions in their personal lives because of their financial dependence on men.

Women Education = Opportunity

4. (U) When the topic turned to education, the women became more animated. They were effusive in their praise of Sheikha Mozah, the consort of the Amir, for undertaking progressive reforms in the area of education. According to the women, improvements in this area are directly attributable to Sheikha Mozah, whom they see as a visionary and a great role model for Qatari women. They noted that Sheikha Mozah has encouraged women to get the education and training needed to qualify them for high-ranking positions. When asked if educational reforms are being undertaken too quickly, the women responded with an emphatic "no," adding that the

reforms taken thus far provide Qatari women access to quality education. Education in turn affords women greater choices and opportunities for their professional development. Our contacts also predicted that the current educational reforms would have particular impact on the next generation of young women, stating that their daughters would benefit greatly from these changes.

The Role of Women in Democracy and Elections

15. (U) Discussion of democracy and elections highlighted a clear division within the group. One faction acknowledged that women have an integral role to play in democracy and elections but cautioned against moving too quickly. They asserted that democratic reform should not be imposed by external forces, nor should its form be dictated by outsiders. These women stressed the need for pragmatism, warning that women should not be pushed into the political arena before they and society are ready. This group also argued against having a quota for women in the upcoming parliamentary elections. In their view, quotas are not only a bad idea but also unconstitutional. According to them, the constitution legitimates the equality between the sexes. Establishing quotas would favor women over men, thus undermining their credibility in front of men.

16. (U) The other group, however, favored a more politically active role for women and expressed the belief that until society is "trained" to accept women in the political arena, at least one woman should be appointed to parliament. Only through their actual presence and participation in these posts, will society become "trained" and sensitized to women in political positions. These women reasoned that women could not afford to wait for Qatari society to get used to women holding political office. They believed that as it stood now, women would not be represented in the new parliament unless one is appointed. Women should seize the opportunity now, they argued, to hold political office and should not worry whether it is by means of election or appointment. They said social and cultural systems in Qatari society create barriers for women. The women pointed to the act of voting as an example, noting that under Qatar's prevailing tribal system, men still dictate how women should vote. As long as the tribal system dominates Qatari society and politics, observed this group, a woman has little chance of being elected to parliament. The tribal system proves the need for a formal or informal minimum quota for women in high office.

The Legal Limits of Motherhood

17. (U) The legal rights of women as mothers are governed under the Family Status Law. A new Family Status Law is pending; it is said to be delayed because of disagreements over some of the new provisions. According to one source, the dispute centers on whether or not some of the provisions of the draft law are too "progressive" on certain women's issues and thus possibly contradicts Islam. The Family Status Law elucidates, among others, the issue of guardianship. According to the law, girls thirteen years old and younger and boys eleven years old and younger are under their mother's guardianship. Once they exceed those ages, guardianship changes to the father. When asked about this provision and their relationship in general with their children, the women admitted that while they have some say in their children's lives, they are not the decision-makers and do not have final say on matters. The women did express that they expected better for their daughters. They looked to educational reforms currently being undertaken to be the catalyst in their daughters' having control over their lives when they grow older.

Legal Discrimination

18. (U) Our contacts said that existing laws do not fully protect women and their children against abuse and discrimination. They complained that women and children had no legal recourse in cases of abuse by a spouse, parent or other family member. They noted that the courts also do not provide protection for women and tend to rule in favor of men on this issue. Cultural beliefs and norms make it difficult for women to talk openly about abuse and tend to contribute to the overall problem.

19. (U) The women also admitted that they do not have equal rights with men when it comes to marriage and to the issue of conferring nationality. Some women complained of the double standard in laws which allow Qatari men to marry foreign women and confer Qatari nationality on them and to their children. The same laws, however, require Qatari women to get prior approval from the Ministry of Interior in order to

marry foreigners, and prevent them from conferring nationality to their spouse and children. The result is that Qatari women tend to avoid marriages with foreigners because their children will be denied Qatari nationality. A few women did not agree that women should have the right to confer Qatari nationality on foreign spouses, stating that if the laws were changed, foreign men would marry Qatari women as a means to gain the rights of citizenship.

10. (U) Our contacts also acknowledged discrimination in access to perquisites of free land and interest-free loan. Qatari men are entitled to a plot of land from the government as well as a 20-year interest free loan, if they are in a senior government position, to build and furnish a house. Qatari women are not entitled to this benefit. The women view this as another factor re-enforcing the insecurity felt by many Qatari women and their inability to take important decisions in their lives.

The Future is our Daughters

11. (U) In closing the luncheon meeting, Poloff asked the women where they saw themselves in the next ten to fifteen years. They responded not about themselves but about their daughters, commenting that their daughters would enjoy greater rights and opportunities than they have had. They believed that their daughters would have better futures and more control over their lives. That the women did not necessarily see a role for themselves in only a decade was illustrative of how they view the limits of their role in society.
PYOTT